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DEPICTING IDENTITY

THE THEOPOLITICAL “OTHER” IN THE LAST JUDGMENT PAINTINGS OF BUCOVINA’S ORTHODOX MONASTERIES¹

BÜLENT ŞENAY, NAGEHAN Z. CEYLANLAR

Abstract. Theopolitics is related to the interaction between theos (god) and politics, or to that between theology – the systematization of the major ideas of a given religious faith – and politics. Theopolitics is a broad attempt to understand and extrapolate political action through the multidimensional lens of geopolitics and theology. Theopolitics, *like* geopolitics, includes analysis of geographical, historical, and cultural characteristics that influence political behavior. Theopolitics, *unlike* geopolitics, extrapolates political action based on further philosophical and theological premises that God exists and acts in human history. This research paper appropriates historical scholarship on religious iconography and theology where it helpfully reminds theology of matters requiring theology’s attention, as well as where it identifies nuances in the phenomenon of religious identity formation of which theology should be mindful. However, it is primarily a history of religion endeavor. The authors engage what they perceive as a significant representation of the other in the 16th century Orthodox Christian theopolitical iconography.

Keywords: Bucovina Monasteries; Religious Other; otherisation; Orthodox Christianity.

Introduction

Theopolitics is related to the interaction between theos (god) and politics, or to that between theology – the systematization of the major ideas of a given religious faith – and politics (Hoffman 1994, 86).

¹ This paper is based on the results of the academic research project KUAP-D/2015-29, 2015-2018, “*Monasteries and the Perception of the Other in the History of Religions: Examples of Italian Catholic, Bucovina Orthodox and Mardin Assyrian Christian Monasteries*”, supported and funded by the Scientific Research Commission, Uludag University, Bursa, Turkey.

Theopolitics is a broad attempt to understand and extrapolate political action through the multidimensional lens of geopolitics and theology. Theopolitics, *like* geopolitics, includes analysis of geographical, historical, and cultural characteristics that influence political behavior. Theopolitics, *unlike* geopolitics, extrapolates political action based on further philosophical and theological premises that God exists and acts in human history (Marzak 2016).

As S.H. Brody suggests in the introduction to his book *Martin Buber's Theopolitics*:

Close examination of the relationship of religion and politics can call into question our very understanding of the nature of both "religion" and "politics" as distinct and separate spheres that can each be described according to its own special set of characteristics. This is an inconvenient situation for university departments like political science and religion, which would like to assume that the objects of their study do in fact exist (Brody 2008,1).

This research paper appropriates historical scholarship on religious iconography and theology where it helpfully reminds theology of matters requiring theology's attention, as well as where it identifies nuances in the phenomenon of religious identity formation of which theology should be mindful. However, it is primarily a history of religion endeavor. The authors engage what they perceive as a significant representation of the other in the 16th century Orthodox Christian theopolitical iconography.

Christian **theopolitics, and not only contemporary Evangelicals**, presupposes that every salvation narrative entails a political underscore, and that every political enterprise presumes a story of salvation. This means that the church faces a host of theopolitical structures contending with the basic Christian story for the allegiance, formation, and identity of Christians. While this is an important discussion for today's Christians, it is not new: the first half of the 16th century saw an array of such 'theopolitical' understandings represented in the Orthodox Christian iconography of the monasteries of Moldavia, "important ecclesiastic monuments of feudal art, most of them built by the former

Moldavian rulers (voivodes) and boyars (Mușat family, Alexander the Good/Alexandru cel Bun, Stephen the Great/Ștefan cel Mare, Peter IV Rareș/Petru Rareș, Alexandru Lăpușneanu, etc.): Voroneț Monastery, Humor Monastery, Sucevița Monastery, Putna Monastery, Arbore Monastery, Dragomirna Monastery, Pătrăuți Monastery, Probota Monastery, etc." (Stăncioiu et alii 2011, 46).

An innovative type of **'theopolitical iconography'** was developed at the time: the churches and monasteries commissioned by the rulers were decorated with large scenes meant to reflect the above mentioned Christian allegiance, formation and identity. What is intriguing about these paintings is not only that they entirely cloth the exterior walls of the monasteries, which is unusual for that period, but also the theopolitical message they render. In striking examples of "otherness/otherisation", these images expose not only a mobilizing anti-Turkish manifesto, but also show Jews as infidels and Armenian Christians and sometimes Catholics as heretics in scenes of the Last Judgment. Indeed the "Other" has been depicted in human discourse in many ways and forms: conversation, meta/narratives, plays, war, politics, religion. Certain religious images function as great symbols uniting a whole nation; others play a major role in individual cults. It is therefore this theo-political message that this paper looks at in such a way as to explore how history and culture influenced the details of the iconographic representation in the art of the Orthodox Christian church in a particular geographical area.

One might appeal to literary and cultural theories, or even psychological and psychoanalytic studies, to explore the notion of otherness and othering, or perhaps turn to postmodern philosophical discussions to explore 'alterity' or to modern philosophical discussions to consider the concept of alienation. Sociological, anthropological and ethnographic theorists and studies, all have much to say on the notion of "OTHERNESS" as well (Mannion 2011, 2). Nevertheless, this paper is about history, but "a type of history that is necessarily a little complicated and micro-historical, yet which demonstrates possibilities that have not been fully realized by the historical profession." (Himka 2009, 6).

The south east European countries offer such a rich history of religious and cultural coexistence as well as otherness. Throughout the

centuries they have been real crossroads of civilizations and religions, pierced by internal connections, conflicts and influences. The Christian, Jewish and Islamic places of worship and the faith routes represent one of the most important examples of their cultural heritage.² Nevertheless, there are not enough researches that provide articulate analysis of the widely inter-woven cultural value of the sanctuaries, churches, monasteries, synagogues and mosques in the region, despite the fact that some did enjoy international recognition, as is the case, for instance, with eight of the Bucovina monasteries, which were considered masterpieces of Byzantine art and were consequently added to the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1993. This paper therefore attempts to cover a gap by exploring the process whereby some of these monasteries with all their architectural beauty became a means of 'otherisation' for not only religious but also cultural, political, and even economic reasons.

Bucovina and its religious iconography

Bucovina is a hilly/mountainous region in the western part of Moldavia (the northeastern third of Romania). Moldavia became an independent state in the 14th century, and reached its peak during the anti-Ottoman crusades of King Stephen the Great (1433-1504) and his son Peter Rareş (1483-1546). The 15th – 16th century Christian Orthodox monasteries that make the subject of this paper were built during the period of this Ottoman expansion, when Islam began advancing on the Carpathian frontier and Christianity receded into the depths of Romania's northern forests. For some 50 or more years, the Ottomans were held at bay by the efforts of the two Moldavian kings. According to semi-legend, whenever Stephen won a battle against the Ottomans, he would commission the construction of a monastery to mark his victory. Therefore, these monasteries were basically built to celebrate local victories in battles against the Muslim Ottoman Turkish conquerors from the East. Both Stephen the Great and Peter Rareş heavily invested

² <http://romaniatourism.com/press-romania-painted-monasteries.html>, last accessed on May 25, 2018.

in these monasteries as holy places and fortifications, but also as centers of learning and economic enterprises.



Other princes and prominent boyars built Putna in 1466-9, Pătrăuți in 1483, Voroneț in 1488, Humor and Probota in 1530, Moldovița in 1532, Râșca in 1542, Slatina in the 1560s, and Sucevița in 1581-1601. For the most part, these monasteries were built after the first Last Judgment (Judecata de Apoi) icons were painted in the Carpathians, but some of them existed as communities of monks before the massive building projects were undertaken, notably Humor and Putna (Himka 2009, 82). Yet, the most significant period of the Moldavian artistic innovation began with the reign of Stephen, who erected and decorated up to thirty churches and monasteries in a period of seventeen years (1487-1504). (Artimon 2011, 2)

The “monasteries” are not in fact simple monasteries – they are actually forts (strongholds), with a rectangular outer defensive wall and quarters, and a Moldavian-style church in the middle. There are altogether 47 such monasteries in Moldavia dating from the 15th to 17th centuries. Of course, not all were commissioned by Stephen and his son,

but the large number of those built by them reflects their success in holding off Ottoman encroachment. Some of these monasteries have, besides the usual interior iconography, rich exterior decorations, which have been preserved to a higher or lesser extent, hence their fame under the name of the “painted monasteries of Bucovina.”

All the 47 monasteries are considered to be masterpieces of Byzantine art but only EIGHT of them (Voroneţ, Humor, Suceviţa, Moldoviţa, Arbore, Pătrăuţi, Probota and Suceava) were placed on UNESCO’s World Heritage list in 1993. According to the UNESCO website, the monuments that are the subject of this nomination form a compact and coherent group in chronological terms, all being built from the end of 15th century until the end of the 16th century. They are all within a 60 km radius of Suceava, the residence of the Moldavian princes of the period. Of these eight Southern Bucovina monasteries, six (Voroneţ, Humor, Râşca, Suceviţa, Moldoviţa, Arbore) are particularly famous for their decorations/frescoes applied to the exterior walls of the churches and the specific blue-green color produced based on a secret recipe from a special stone called “lapis lazuli” (a sapphire-like stone mined in northeast Afghanistan as early as the 7th millennium BC smaller quantities of which are mined in Italy, Mongolia, the United States and Canada.) These paintings have resisted for over half a millennium.

The best-preserved of the six painted monasteries are Humor, Moldoviţa, Suceviţa, and Voroneţ. Arbore and Râşca are in a reasonable state. During the research, we have especially visited these six monasteries because of all the painted monasteries in Southern Bucovina it is in these particular churches that the exterior paintings have survived most distinctly. The artwork has amazingly resisted harsh exposure to elements for over 450 years and the intense colors have been surprisingly well preserved.

According to Viorel Guliciuc,

Those frescoes are not merely wall decorations, but complete religious and philosophical messages, having as purpose to make known the story of the Bible and the lives of the Orthodox saints known to the folk, through the use of images: Tree of Jesse and the Last Judgment (Voroneţ), Ladder to Paradise and the Hymn to the

Virgin (Sucevița), The Hymn of the Dead (Saint John – Suceava), the Siege of Constantinople (Moldovița), the Return of the Prodigal Son (Humor), the Genesis (Arbore), etc. Some of those painted churches have the so called Frieze of the Philosophers, sometimes associated with the Tree of Jesse – displaying some unexpected portraits of some ancient philosophers – Plato, Aristotle, Pythagoras, Solon, etc. (Guliciuc 2013, 170)



The quality of the frescoes, the magnificence of the **Last Judgment** scene (**the main focus of our research and consequently of this paper**) and the brilliant specific vivid blue color that serves as background to the designs has earned Voroneț the moniker of 'Sistine Chapel of the East'. In its turn, Humor is characterized by its predominant red color while the largest and finest of the monasteries, Sucevița, has its thousands images painted on a background of emerald green. Moldovița, which is situated in the middle of a quaint farming village, consists of a strong fortified enclosure with towers and heavy gates, with the beautiful yellow painted church in the center.

Each painter in every monastery, although following the canonical iconographic program, interpreted the scenes in personal, slightly different ways. As John Paul Himka puts it, “Last Judgment iconography was the most complex iconography in the Byzantine and post-Byzantine cultural sphere. An icon or mural of the Last Judgment was composed of dozens of discrete elements.” (Himka 2009, 6). Using colors like the above mentioned blue of Voroneţ, green-red of Suceviţa, yellow of Moldoviţa, red of Humor and green of Arbore, these painters (most of them unknown) described the biblical stories of the earth and heaven, scenes from the lives of the Holy Virgin and Jesus Christ, stories of man’s beginnings and of his life after death. The reasons for such vast scenes were at the same time religious and didactic: to promote Orthodoxy and to educate the illiterate (Vujko & Plavša 2013, 192). Because besides marking military victories, the painted monasteries of Bucovina were obviously also meant to educate a largely illiterate peasant population about the life and glories of Christ and his mother at a time in history when literacy was still the provenance of a leisured, fortunate few. Some of the churches were additionally designed as burial places for various noblemen, who commissioned painters to share the Gospel on the church walls. At first, the paintings were limited to the interior walls but then they were expanded to include the outer/exterior walls as well. As for the Last Judgment frescoes, they “became more and more popular works, aimed at the illiterate or semi-literate highland villagers, expressing their concerns, amusing and arousing them, until there was a disciplining reaction on the part of the educated clerical elite.” (Himka 2009, 189).

The interior structure of these churches, too, has its own particularities. The *naos* or *nave* is the main room for the celebration of the liturgy, where the people stand during the religious service (there are no pews or other seats in an Orthodox church). Moreover, traditional Orthodox churches follow the Jewish practice of men standing to the right and women to the left. The nave is roughly square, with three semicircular *apses*, the overall shape referencing the cross. The apse at the front is beyond the *iconostasis* and the innermost sanctuary contains the altar. Many of these paintings are elaborate 15th century frescoes featuring portraits of saints and prophets, scenes from the life of Jesus,

images of angels and demons, heaven and hell. Deemed masterpieces of Byzantine art, as mentioned earlier, these churches are one-of-a-kind architectural sites in Europe. Far from being merely wall decorations, the murals represent complete cycles of religious depictions.

One of the purposes of the frescoes was, once again, to make the story of the Bible and the lives of the most important Orthodox saints known to villagers by use of images. Their outstanding composition, elegant outline and harmonious colors blend perfectly with the surrounding landscape. From this point of view, this group of churches constitutes a specific phenomenon in Romanian art, as besides their exterior painted walls of exceptional aesthetic value, they propose a perfect symbiosis between color, architecture, and surrounding landscape. In fact, the Moldavian idea of completely covering the external facades of churches with paintings is original and provides us with an excellent illustration of the cultural and religious context of the Balkans from the late 15th century to the late 16th century.

This tradition of decorating the exteriors of churches had its own specific iconography, dominated by certain obligatory themes:

1. the Church Hierarchy,
2. the Tree of Jesse (representing Christ's genealogy, a wide-spread iconographical theme in Europe during the Middle Ages... a symbol of the continuity between the Old and the New Testaments, as well as of the Logos before and after the arising of Jesus. The Tree in Sucevita is an evolved version, as compared to the same scene at Voroneț)
3. the siege of Constantinople
4. the Last Judgement scene with the depiction of the religious other (who also happened to be a political enemy, such as Turks, Tatars and Latin rite Catholics, and/or an economic contender for the local populatio, such as Jews and Armenians)

Thus, among the "RELIGIOUS others" who will have their sins weighed at the Last Judgment depicted in these paintings we see the Ottoman Turks, as well as besieged Constantinople being defended by a Moldavian rider. These scenes can be interpreted as a military message,

a collection of images that gave the lay mind an impulse to think further in the future: “Could I be the rider who successfully defends Suceava (for instance)?” may have been the question to come to one’s mind after viewing the exterior paintings, particularly the Siege of Constantinople. All the scenes together thus might have offered the viewers an experience that they might not have otherwise had, an experience that could enrich their view of certain issues related to the times they lived in.



The **LAST JUDGMENT** theme is usually the largest of the paintings on the exterior walls of the Bucovina monasteries. In most cases it includes the so-called ‘pagans’ (Turks, Tatars), infidels (Jews) and heretics (Armenians and/or Latin rite Catholics). Milton Garidis (who is known for his research on representations of nations and religions in Byzantine religious art) noted that representations of condemned nations in the Bucovina icons of the Last Judgment, including Jews or Muslims, appeared for the first time at the turn of the 12th century in the Byzantine art from the area of Mount Sinai, Greece, Serbia, Macedonia and Russia. After the schism of Christianity in the

year 1054 and after the Latin rite Catholics destroyed Constantinople in 1204, Catholic representatives were introduced into the Last Judgment icons (Garidis 1969).



One can see who the portrayed are by analyzing the inscriptions above the representations. Thus, apart from individual Turks in the mouth of a dragon and in the river of fire, Last Judgment icons sometimes included leaders of the great Christian heresies (Arius and Nestorius), biblical and historical opponents and persecutors of Christianity living in the first ages (Herod the Great, Caiaphas, Julian the Apostate, Trajan Decius) as well as prophet Muhammad (presented as the leader of nations with the symbol of the crescent on the Moldovița Monastery). In a revealing touch of medieval propaganda, Muhammad is shown among the condemned.

All these "OTHERS" are thrown into HELL FIRE, a vision that later became quite customary in Romanian iconography. In this depiction of hell fire (a grand funnel of live coals opening at the feet of Jesus), sinners, among whom one can sometimes see illustrious characters like kings or popes, are struggling to get out. This emerging of the river of

everlasting fire equally represents the divide between East and West. Near the seat of judgment, Adam and Eve are also represented, along with prophets, hierarchs, martyrs and Moses himself. In another illustration, a hand is holding the scales of justice where the sins of mankind are being weighed, while to the right and to the left, the devils are quarreling for the possession of those judged. Among the doomed, there are, as previously mentioned, Turks and Tatars, with harsh faces and fierce looks, but also, unexpectedly, **Greco-Latin philosophers such as Aristotle and Plato.**



The beautifully colored paintings representing the Last Judgment thus provide us with striking examples of “otherness/otherisation.” As we have just seen, in these depictions the “religious other” was generally embodied by Jews, Turks, Tatars and, interestingly, Armenian or Catholic Christians. These monasteries with all their architectural beauty therefore show us how “otherness” manifested itself in the Orthodox Christian art of 15th – 16th century Moldavia and by default how it evolved from one stage to the next.



Looking back at the canons established by the Second Council of Nicaea (787), we see that the 8th canon declares that Hebrews who observe the Sabbath and other Jewish customs, should not be accepted in the church unless they convert in sincerity. The paintings can therefore also be interpreted as referring to Christians who refuse to acknowledge the dual – godly and human – nature of Christ (Arians, Nestorians, Monophysites), as well as iconoclasm, and to those who reject the entire written as well as unwritten church tradition. In time, the worshippers of those faiths apparently found their place in the icons too. Armenians, for instance, were monophysites, and therefore “deserved” to be thrown in Hell as heretics.

The Last Judgment was thus first of all a scene of a social-educational program and a warning for all the people who did not conform to the church order. It was meant as a self-assessment of the person looking at the scene, designed to “allow viewers to judge themselves when they see the Last Judgment.” (Hann 2006, 56). Therefore, the anti-Ottoman view of the Moldavian iconography is an additional and specific interpretation, especially as the Moldavian Last Judgments appear in the tumultuous context of the 16th century,

dominated by the Ottoman-Habsburg rivalry, which gave priority to the idea of the end of days (Artimon 2011, 9). V. Drăguț highlights the accentuated features of the Ottomans, giving the example of Voroneț: “A psychological center of the composition is formed by the group of the Turks, their typology being admirably described, clothed with great pomp, with large turbans. The inscription, carefully written, specifies that it is the Turks that are being presented...” (Drăguț, Florea, Grigorescu & Mihalache 1970, 71-72).

The scene is usually represented in the following way: the entire plan is vertically divided by a red river of fire into which doomed people are falling towards the open mouth of the devil. It is therefore divided in four regions: the upper layer, of the Celestial Court, the second layer, of the weighing of souls of the good and sinful people; both of these layers are above the river of fire. The other two sections are divided by the river: on the left side is the Heaven and on the right side, is the Earth. It is important to notice here the great difference between the features of the good and the sinners. While the groups of the good are rather conventionally and schematically depicted, the groups of the sinful are true portraits, which make them most relevant. These groups clearly outline distinct features of people of the above mentioned nationalities: Jews, Ottoman Turks – which comprise the most numerous group – Tatars and Armenian Christians. The Moldavian Last Judgments therefore seem to do something more: they center the attention on the group of the damned (Artimon 2011, 13).



Conclusion

The representation of the Other namely Jews, Turks, Tatars, Armenians and Catholics in the Bucovina paintings constitutes a theopolitical project of identity formation through a fusion of the political with the theological in the 16th century. Here we use the term "theopolitics" to define the relationship proper between the religious and the political, as can be seen in the Last Judgment scenes of the Bucovina monasteries.

Theopolitics is not the same with political theology. In other words, where political theology deploys the power of the divine in the service of the authoritarian state, theopolitics denies any possibility of truly legitimizing institutional human power (Brody 2008, 4-5). Yet, what we see in reality is that human power justifies itself through an 'earthly theopolitics' which creates otherness and conflict. It is not in history only that we find churches or religious organizations creating divisions and alterity. Even churches in recent times have returned to discourses and practices which are destined to accentuate otherness more than human commonality. One can give plenty of examples on this from Evangelical Zionist churches in the US to Pentecostal theology. Contemporary theopolitics is distinctive in at least three ways: first, it mainly involves fundamentalist churches that until the early 1980s kept aloof from political activism; second, these groups endorse political positions on a wide variety of issues that seem remote from specific religious teachings; and third, these groups have adopted a strictly partisan orientation, instead of lobbying whatever political party is in power, in order to advance their agenda (Greenawalt). These dimensions did not necessarily exist in the 16th century politics of theology as represented in the Last Judgment frescoes that make the object of our research. However, the idea of salvation and damnation seems not to have changed a lot. Contemporary Evangelical theopolitics continues the tradition and does everything to push the other into damnation, into a war of Armageddon.

After a century blighted by conflict and divisions, but which also witnessed significant attempts of ecumenical, inter-faith and inter-cultural understanding and dialogue, **the 21st century begins with**

otherness being perceived all too often in negative and pejorative terms once again. And, in the postcolonial period, Islam has become the number one victim of this renewed otherisation, particularly under the form of Islamophobia.

Divisions, deficiencies and disagreements occupy far too much of our energy and time. In general, religious otherness in the 21st century has become not less but rather more accentuated (Mannion 2011, 5).

What we learn from these monastery paintings is that difference and otherness in religious contexts can be (and was) accentuated and perceived in pejorative terms. In our contemporary context of religious pluralism, marked by diversity and conflicting truth claims, we must break the strangling narrowness of our own particular religious home, institution, and even community. The way forward opened up by thinking outside the box is neither exclusivism nor inclusivism nor even, indeed, pluralism, as these positions are commonly understood, but a deep intellectual and spiritual humility (Latinovic, Mannion & Phan 2015, 7).

However, comparing history to the contemporary age, it is sad to see that still entire faiths and cultures are perceived in a way that allows their being pitted against one another. Conflicts rage, defining the opposite side through its very cultural and religious otherness. Human rights are breached and international law is ignored because certain states believe that 'the other' deserves fewer rights and less dignity than those who are more like us. For example, today, whether it is the distorted theological undertones by the evangelical movements in the U.S., which emanate into political overtones via neo-conservative or far right republican groups and parties; whether it is the distorted ultra-national political overtones of parties such as UKIP in the UK or the racial overtones of the English Defense League (EDL), or of far right movements such as Geert Wilders' Party for Freedom in Holland and Jean-Marie Le Pen's National Front in France; whether it is the distorted theological undertones that germinate in parties such as the BJP in India, which lead to an overtone advocating hatred and violence towards the "other"; whether it is the distorted theological undertones that find ammunition via visible non state actors and groups such as "Al-Qaeda" or "Daeash" (ISIS), or whether it is the distorted theological undertone that has tuned into a visible theopolitical overtone in Burma with the mass genocide and human rights violations

against Rohingyans, what is required as a solution to these distorted theological undertones and overtones along with the related distorted political undertones and overtones is a re-alignment toward the center ground in theological and political policy making (Kaleem).

The 'Other' has been part of our overt discourse for a very long time, and has also manifested itself in human discourse in so many implicit ways – in conversation, narratives, actions, play, war, politics, charity, morality, social activism and the like. Emmanuel Levinas and, following his influence, Jacques Derrida, are two of the better-known thinkers who have written extensively and explicitly about 'the other' in recent decades. Levinas, in particular, has helped to raise awareness of the fact that attention to the other and otherness is primarily a matter of ethical responsibility. Although alterity, attention to the awareness and eventual celebration of the other and of otherness, have not become commonplace, an increasing awareness that domination, control, manipulation and suppression of the other are morally wrong has been a prominent feature of postmodern consciousness (Mannion 2011, 3). Normative theopolitical undertones or overtones that are generally accepted as the core tenets and principles within the theological frameworks of mainstream faith traditions would not advocate hatred and violence of the "other." It is the "extreme theopolitical" undertones and overtones which traverse towards the realms of individual and political violence, hatred, division, discriminate and indiscriminate extermination of individuals and groups that do not ascribe to their world view where the tensions and root of the problems reside (Kaleem).

The lesson of the Bucovina monasteries is therefore that theology can be used for political ends, which is where the discussion about the theopolitics of otherness finds its origins.

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